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6/7/09 SAEN 17A

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Page 1

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Section: A Section

How Texas speaker handled voter ID issue

Gary Scharrer

AUSTIN - New House Speaker **Joe Straus** knew Senate Republicans complicated his job when they changed long-standing Senate rules on the second day of the session to guarantee the passage of a **voter ID** bill on their side of the Capitol.

The political dynamics were much different at the west end of the state Capitol, where Straus, R-San Antonio, had to navigate a House divided between 75 Republicans and 74 Democrats, not counting himself. If Senate Republicans were going to make voter ID their line-in-the-sand issue, House Democrats were obligated to kick back.

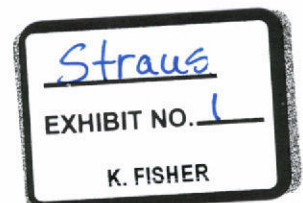
And Straus had promised to be a bipartisan speaker on his way to winning the job in early January with more than 70 Democrats supporting him. It takes 76 votes to win a contest for House speaker.

"The issue of ballot security is important, but the way the Senate behaved at the first opportunity did nothing to help the House pass a responsible anti-voter fraud bill. So, at this point, it's become all politics," Straus said in February.

For Republicans, the issue was simple: Make sure that people who come to vote are who they say they are. The hardliners wanted a law requiring a photo - without exceptions. And the public favors the concept of voter ID.

For Democrats, the issue was more nuanced. Many were willing to support some sort of voter ID system as long as voting was made easier - not harder.

The absence of a consensus created a stalemate.



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In the end, Democrats used House rules to tie that chamber up in knots over five days to prevent the voter ID bill from reaching the floor for debate. But the stalling action produced collateral damage as other important legislation died in the process, including expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Take away voter ID from the legislative equation and Straus might have had smooth sailing.

"Everything would have been wonderful, but it wasn't my choice to deal with it the way we had to with the temperature turned up as much as it was. That was Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst's decision," Straus said one day after the session ended. "While I'm supportive of voter ID and ballot security, I thought it was unwise for him to take the extraordinarily measure that he did to get to this place."

Early on, Straus remained optimistic that he could move a reasonable voter ID measure because of his faith in Rep. Todd Smith, R-Eules, whom he chose to chair the House Elections Committee.

Democratic leaders, however, remained skeptical. They trusted Smith, who is considered a fair and reasonable lawmaker. But the committee had too many GOP hardliners for the Democrats' comfort. They didn't trust Smith's ability to control the committee.

In early March, the speaker believed he needed for the bill to be considered, if not approved.

"I need the debate to take place, and I need for it not to die because of me," he said. Meanwhile, some of Straus' Democratic allies, who helped him become speaker, privately were framing the issue as one that could make or break the new speaker.

"It's strange how an issue like this can just suck all the political oxygen out of the session - not that the issue is not worth discussing and finding some way to improve," Straus said in early March. "But it shouldn't dominate the legislative session when we have a very challenging economy, a long-term budget problem in Texas that's going to be completely ignored for two more years."

By the end of April, 71 House Republicans signed a letter demanding a hard-line approach on voter ID.

"Both sides are taking a really hard position and exaggerating it. Democrats exaggerate the danger of a more modest bill, and Republicans exaggerate the depth of the problem that needs to be addressed," he said. "But if people get through their theatrics on this, I don't think it will be a lasting problem."

A day before Democrats launched a five-day stall, Straus sensed an imminent showdown: "It's the one big dramatic moment, but we'll get through it."

Straus said he would try to keep the House from blowing up over the issue, but without playing a heavy hand.

The Democrats' five-day stall, in which they debated every routine bill to kill time, clearly frustrated Straus.

"I wasn't upset about the Democrats' use of the rules, although it's unprecedented and dangerous to use the local and consent calendar that way. My response was very firm - I would not recognize any member to suspend a rule to take up a bill that was behind the local and consent calendar and the voting ID bill."

That meant a number of important bills Democrats wanted to debate would die by as a result of their stalling tactics voter ID.

Ironically, the voter ID bill probably increased Straus' stature with fellow Republicans.

"They saw me stand up and take a side but not try to defend the breaking of the rules. I enforced the rules. I was on their side, and it worked out fine," he said.

"Both sides took a position and stood with it and now we're passed it. The (voter ID) legislation didn't get voted on, but two weeks from now they're going to say, 'Well, whatever.'"

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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